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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1936  
RUEHOU/AMEMBASSY OUAGADOUGOU 0291  
RUEHNJ/AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA 0103  
RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 0069  
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0017  
RUEHNV/AMEMBASSY MONROVIA 0040  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000492

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [ML](#) [NG](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: DESPERATELY LOOKING NORTH: THE MIGRANTS OF THE SAHARA

REF: ALGIERS 463

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Classified By: Acting DCM Mark Schapiro; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The cities of Tamanrasset and Djanet in the Algerian south have become extended transit hubs for thousands of illegal migrants from sub Saharan Africa who are looking north to seek opportunity. With 130,000 residents, Tamanrasset is the largest population center in southern Algeria and is located 450 kilometers north of the Malian border town of Tinzaouatene and 400 kilometers north of Niger's In Guezzam. A Saharan crossroads, Tamanrasset is home to 47 African nationalities, according to Mayor Ahmed Benmalek, and is the primary stopover point for migrants traveling from central Africa to Mali, and then north to Algeria. To the northeast of Tamanrasset, Djanet has only 14,000 residents; however, its proximity to Libya, which is only 80 kilometers away, has made the city a hub for clandestine migrants from northern Niger cutting the corner of Algeria en route to Ghat, Libya, or further north. Tamanrasset Mayor Benmalek told us that most migrants are desperate to improve their economic well-being and arrive with the goal of continuing north, crossing the border to Morocco and then on to Europe. In reality, many never leave Tamanrasset and stay on to work as manual laborers, or become involved in criminal networks run by various migrant groups. The region's vast, porous borders have enticed thousands of migrants to risk their lives in the desert and have strained the capacity of Mali and Niger's weak border infrastructure; all while creating a booming market for smugglers and counterfeiters. END SUMMARY.

SAY YOU'RE FROM MALI

12. (C) Algeria's border policy in the south dates back to the 1962 war of independence during which Mali openly supported Algeria's effort against colonial France, while Niger preferred to remain aloof and not take sides. Never wont to forgive a perceived slight, Algeria instituted a visa regime for citizens of Niger, but repaid Mali's moral support for independence with visa-free travel. Today, Malian citizens need only present their passport and vaccination record to enter Algeria.

13. (C) Namakoro Diarra, Mali's Consul General in Tamanrasset for the past eight years, told us on March 25 that the

bilateral visa-free agreement between Mali and Algeria also backfires. The policy, according to Diarra, has encouraged thousands of migrants to use Mali as a transit route into Algeria, straining Mali's capacity to manage its border, and creating a boom industry for smugglers and counterfeiters of Malian documents. Worse still, Diarra complained, when illegal migrants are caught, Algerian authorities simply transport them back to Tinzaouatene and "dump them back on us." Diarra said an informal census done by his consulate counted 1,337 Malian residents in Tamanrasset, but he admitted the real number was likely higher and the census was not yet complete as of the end of March. Diarra's administrator, Mousa Dafanga, said the consulate has been flooded with requests for Malian travel documents, particularly consular registration cards which serve as a residence permit. Dafanga said he was fighting an uphill battle to stem the use of counterfeit documents obtained by some to enter Algeria, or establish eligibility for residence cards. As he showed us examples of orange consular registration cards alongside the fakes he and local authorities have seized, Dafanga explained that the consulate recently began issuing an additional "carte de matriculation" for each residence card to help Algerian authorities identify fakes. "It's only a matter of time before criminals copy this too," Dafanga predicted, "then I don't know what we will do."

#### CASH, SMUGGLERS AND VICE

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14. (C) Local NGO activist Faycal Abdelaziz, a native of Tamanrasset who has worked for several years with the region's Nigerien migrant population, said migrant communities are highly cohesive and organize themselves based

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on group loyalty. This, he said, is best demonstrated by the structure of migrant smuggling and prostitution rings. Criminal activity, he explained, is arranged by nationality. "Maliens work for Maliens and Nigerians for Nigerians, and so on," he said. Abdelaziz told us the region's large military presence created a demand for prostitution. He estimated that Nigerian and Ghanaian prostitution rings brought several hundred women to Algeria each year for this purpose, for example. As to other criminal activity, Abdelaziz mentioned Nigeria as the primary source of illegal drugs and counterfeit money in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigerians, he added, are also the most violent. In terms of moving cash and proceeds from criminal activity, Abdelaziz said migrants use cell phones to transfer phone card credit that can be converted into cash, or simply wire funds through Western Union. For 3,000 dinars (USD 40), Abdelaziz told us, Congolese and Cameroonian smugglers arrange transportation in 4x4 Toyota trucks driven by Malian Tuaregs to help migrants cross into Algeria.

15. (C) The historical Tuareg slave trade, he said, has disappeared in the region as Tuareg culture has become more urbanized in Algeria. He explained, however, that there were concerns about modern forms of slavery, such as trafficking, that occur within the scope of criminal activity. Abdelaziz recalled one story in which a Nigerien girl was used as payment for a shipment of contraband from Niger. More common, he said, was the exploitation of migrant children for street begging and menial labor. French expat and longtime Tamanrasset resident Nicolas Loisillon told us some African migrants force their relatives into prostitution as a means to earn money for onward travel to Europe. If this fails, Loisillon said, a family may leave a son or daughter with a smuggler's kin to work off debt incurred for travel to Europe. Most of the time, Loisillon continued, migrants fail to earn enough money to leave and end up staying in Tamanrasset to work and send money back home to relatives.

#### STAY AND WORK

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16. (C) Many contacts in Tamanrasset told us that obstacles to obtaining Algerian residence and work permits made working legally in Algeria difficult. However, growing tourism and development in the region now provide seasonal employment for migrants coming from some of the most isolated corners of the Sahara, according to Loisillon. Mokhtar Zounga's Akar-Akar tour agency operates a desert resort in the village of Outoul several kilometers outside of Tamanrasset that he says employs a small village in Niger located just across the border from Algeria. Half of the village works at the resort at any given time, Zounga explained, and they rotate with the other half, seasonally. Djanet's growing tourism industry also draws on seasonal labor from Niger to employ cooks, house cleaners and maintenance workers, according to Djanet tour operator Hamou Dahou. Authorities in Tamanrasset told us they welcomed the opportunity to employ Africans who come to Algeria legally, citing the need for more manual labor to support local development programs. But Boubekour, Tamanrasset's wali, acknowledged it was hard to identify illegal migrants and prevent them from working.

#### DEATH IN THE TASSILI

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17. (C) In addition to their exposure to criminal threats and refolement, migrants must also assume the risks of navigating the desolate, harsh desert terrain of the Sahel and southern Sahara. Djanet tour operator Hamou Dahou told us that Tuareg guides, some of whom work as smugglers outside of the tourist season, know the desert well and can map safe routes with ample sources of water. However, he said desert travel "is not without risks." Not all smugglers are familiar enough with the location of wells. "Vehicles break down, and sometimes people lose their way. These people are doomed," he remarked. Dahou has led groups in the Tassili national park for thirty years. He told us his groups frequently encounter migrants walking from Niger towards Libya along the Tassili plateau. His guides have rescued migrants whom they have found near death after being abandoned by smugglers. Dahou said some tour operators

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contact the National Gendarmerie to assist with rescues, but migrants are often reluctant to accept help for fear they will be deported. Many of those who get into trouble, however, never see help. Dahou recounted one case in which he discovered a Muslim African in the desert who had clad himself in white and covered his face, stacked his documents neatly under a rock, and layed down in the sand to die. "He knew there was nothing he could do, and accepted it."

#### COMMENT

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18. (C) The diversity, migration and labor patterns of Tamanrasset and Djanet make the region a unique area for opportunism, whether in the form of smuggling, trafficking, or extremist recruitment (reftel). As reported in reftel, the Algerian government maintains an active grip on relations with local tribes, watching carefully the ways in which desperation can feed extremism. The resulting interethnic cocktail makes Tamanrasset in particular an ideal place for programming and engagement, as these activities can ripple out into the Sahara. However, the degree of government control means that civil society and non-governmental partners are all but non-existent in Algeria's deep south. Our contacts in Tamanrasset and Djanet were unanimous in touting tourism as the lifeblood of the region, the best hope for increased employment and education. In the meantime, the vast expanse of desert along Algeria's southern border is almost impossible to secure completely, meaning the steady flow of migrants heading north at all costs will continue.

PEARCE